

Evidence Brief

Best Practices for Creating Safe Spaces for Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX’s Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: “youth,” “teens,” “youth space,” “safe space,” “youth leisure,” and “the benefits of youth spaces.”

Definitions of Key Terms

Our review of the literature defines “space” not only by the physical or fixed location, but also by the interactions within. Cornwall (2004) cited Henri Lefebvre’s writings that “space is a social product... It is not simply ‘there,’ a neutral container waiting to be filled: but rather is dynamic and shaped through and by people’s interactions” (p. 80). Furthermore, Steenbergen and Foisy’s (2006) definition of a safe space is one that provides “a supportive environment in which participants are able to have their voices validated and heard free of discrimination” (p. 96).

Summary of Evidence: Key Findings

While the research specific to “youth spaces” is limited, research does suggest that youth who experience adverse conditions can acquire leisure skills, such as artistic creativity, if they have access to these opportunities in positive, constructive spaces that focus on their inner talents and strengths (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017).

In a study conducted by McClelland and Giles (2014), eight youth were interviewed who identified themselves as living on the street in Ottawa. The findings suggest that street-involved youth who participate in a range of unstructured leisure activities form social connectedness with others. This is crucial, especially for street-involved youth, as it can offer support from a network of peers and provide safety and companionship. The findings also pointed to the importance of listening to youth voices and sharing in their experiences to empower them. More specifically, the results showed that engaging youth in unstructured leisure activities – such as watching movies, playing pick-up sports games at city parks, going for coffee, playing chess, and being active in social activist groups – allows them the opportunities to share stories and create close bonds.

Research in this area also suggests that safe spaces for youth offer protective factors, including a sense of safety, meaningful relationships with others, and positive identity development (Asakura,

2010). Offering spaces where youth can spend self-directed leisure time and socialize in a safe and welcoming environment is an avenue through which meaningful engagement can occur (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017). For example, in a research study conducted to explore the youth wellbeing outcomes associated with participation in Fusion afterschool programs from the perspective of adult stakeholders, one of the key findings was that creating a physical space for youth to meet that is safe and youth-friendly provides opportunities for socializing, learning, and engaging (Cross & Lauzon, 2015).

Having spaces for youth to support each other is key, as they allow youth to feel seen and connected to others who share similar experiences. This may also support the (re)creation of a sense of community or healthy social relationships, which researchers have argued is often damaged/destroyed by an environment in which there is a lot of violence (Watson, 2015). Offering youth the opportunity to meet in a safe, non-judgmental, and mutually respectful space allows young people (especially youth leaders) to work together to mobilize the voices of youth to better support high-risk youth and meet their unique, diverse needs (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017).

Summary of Evidence: Best Practices

1. Take a bottom-up approach.

Many youth considered “at risk” have spent most of their lives being told by others what they should do. Taking a bottom-up youth engagement approach allows the youth to work alongside adults in a mutually respectful way that can promote empowerment, positive relationship building, and meaningful community involvement. Also, a bottom-up approach highlights the importance of taking a youth-led/-guided approach to youth engagement. For example, spaces that foster youth civic action create pathways, structures, and vehicles to engage young people in critical discussion, dialogue, and action. This extends beyond the physical space to include the activities and interactions within (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017; Richards-Schuster & Dobbie, 2011).

2. Offer youth mentorship opportunities.

Whenever possible, offer youth mentorship opportunities to enhance skill-building (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; mindyourmind, n.d.). Youth should feel connected and supported (Jans & De Backer, 2002); they should have access not just to physical space and resources, but also to caring adults and communities that they can count on (Martínez, Loyola & Cumsille, 2017).

3. Be inclusive in the creation of your youth space.

In 2010, the town of Ajax conducted a study of recreational youth spaces. A number of findings were shared, based on research of demographics, trends, and best practices, and consultations with

local youth (see the link to the study under References). Some of the findings include the need for youth spaces to be supported by programs and services that allow for a wide range of recreational and skill development opportunities. Integrating philosophies of youth engagement, inclusivity, safety, and development of life skills with municipal objectives is necessary to developing successful and well-utilized spaces. Youth engagement is necessary to ensure that programs and spaces are responsive to the needs of local youth, and to provide opportunities for youth to gain confidence and skills in decision-making and public participation.

Recommendations from this study include:

- Focus youth spaces on providing a range of recreation and resource-based opportunities.
- Engage youth in the design and operation of drop-in facilities and programs to empower youth, facilitate positive leadership skills, and create a sense of ownership in the facility.
- Provide youth facilities in areas that are highly accessible and visible to supervision, such as those serviced by public transit or near bicycle paths.
- Incorporate sufficient areas for arts and cultural activities in youth spaces, to provide channels for creative and personal expression that youth are consistently seeking (i.e. urban art, spoken art, and musical expression).

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